

Tracing Aldo Leopold on the Gila

– Dan Styer; 27 June 2024 (spelling error corrected 1 July 2024)

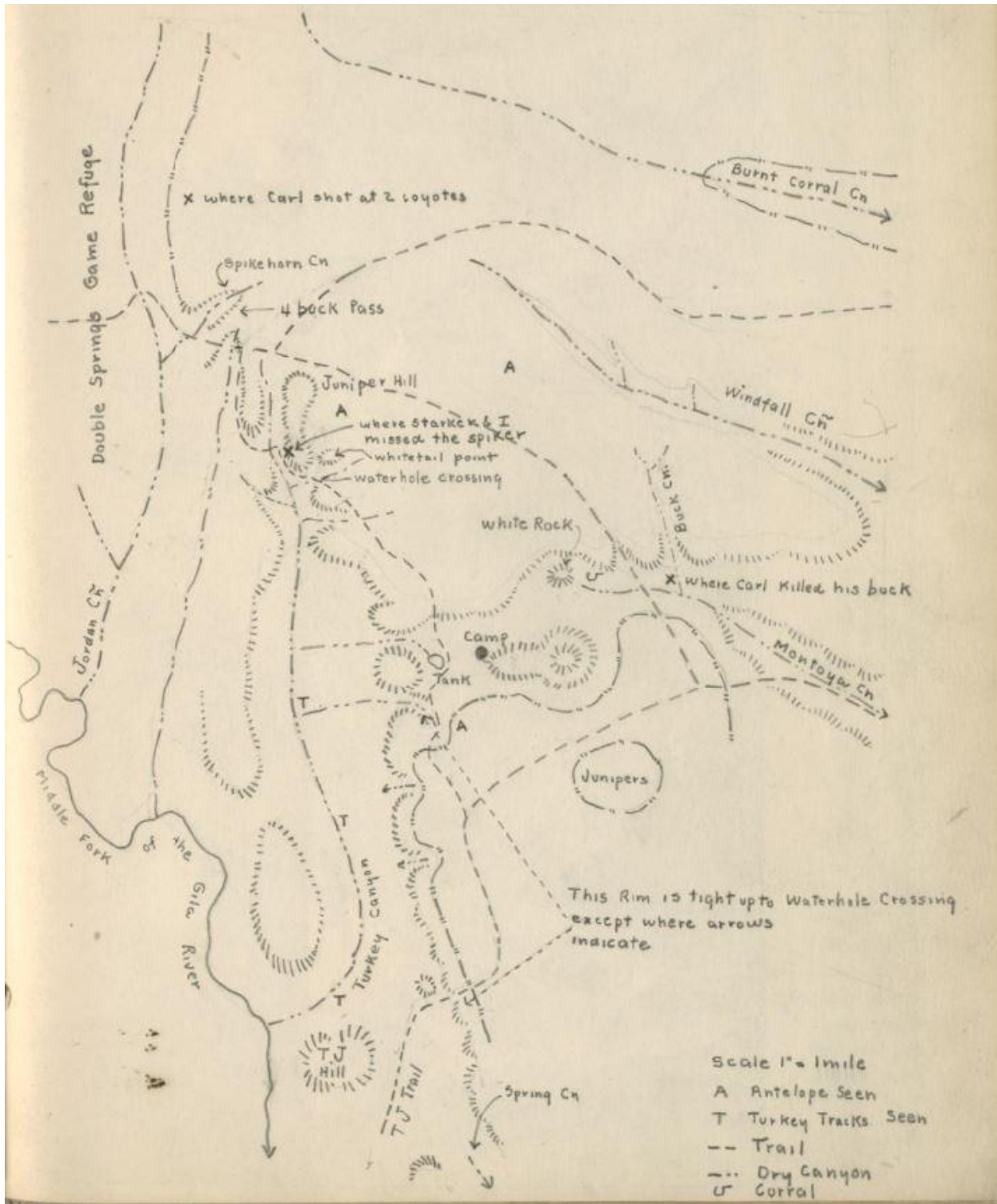
You can find this essay, and all my other Leopold tracing efforts, at
<http://www.oberlin.edu/physics/dstyer/LeopoldLocations.html>.

The conservationist Aldo Leopold was introduced to the Gila [pronounced “hee-luh”] when he worked for the US Forest Service, southwest district, in 1909–24. He recommended that the area be set aside for its wilderness qualities, and when this happened by administrative action on 3 June 1924 the Gila became “the first designated Wilderness Area anywhere in the world.”¹

Leopold made three long hunting trips into the area: at Diamond Creek on 17 – 29 November 1923, at the Middle Fork of the Gila River on 9 – 21 November 1927, and at Whiterock on 7 – 20 November 1929. His journal entries for the last two trips were transcribed into the book *Round River*. Back in 2022, I decided to celebrate the first day of the second century of wilderness preservation by backpacking in the Gila on 3 June 2024, and by searching for Leopold’s 1927 and 1929 campsites.

My walk started at the Middle Fork Trailhead, not far from Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, about noon on 1 June 2024. It was hot, but the Middle Fork Trail often fords the Middle Fork, and each time I forded I splashed water on my legs, arms, and face. After a few crossings comes the junction with White Rocks Trail or, as it was called in Leopold’s day, the TJ Trail.

¹ So described by Dave Foreman, *The Big Outside*, 1992, page 344. But in fact New York State had on 15 May 1885 set aside by law an Adirondack Forest Preserve that “shall be forever kept as wild forest lands”. (See Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 1982, page 119.) However the Adirondacks were preserved in order to assure a water supply for the Erie Canal. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the Gila was “the first Wilderness Area anywhere in the world designated for visits by humans”.



Leopold's sketch map from his 1929 trip; Aldo Leopold Archives, University of Wisconsin—Madison.

Climbing up from the river to the mesa was steep, hot, and trying. But I was delighted to find where the current-day White Rocks Trail takes a gate through the Montoya drift fence, just as it had in Leopold's day.



View west showing the current-day White Rocks Trail passing through the Montoya drift fence at latitude/longitude 33.2588, -108.2184.

Then for a mile or two I walked along the flat mesa to the vicinity of Leopold's 1929 camp.

Leopold set up his camp “under a big spreading alligator juniper on the edge of a pretty park full of fine grama grass. It is 200 yards down to Evans’ stock tank for water.” In 1929 there was only one stock tank, but today there are two – I believe that the lower one is the original. I searched for “a big spreading alligator juniper” and found only one:



A “big spreading alligator juniper on the edge of a pretty park full of fine grama grass” at latitude/longitude 33.2805, -108.2208.

And, according to my GPS data, this alligator juniper is 189.53 yards from the higher end of the lower stock tank! Trees and landscapes can, of course, change over the course of ninety-four and a half years. But if this is not Leopold’s own alligator juniper, it is certainly very close.

I tried to set up camp exactly where Leopold had, but there were a lot of gnats. I moved uphill a few dozen yards. After the sun set, it was so dark that I could easily distinguish the two stars, Mizar and Alcor, at the crook of the Big Dipper.

The next morning I walked the White Rocks/TJ Trail back to the Middle Fork. The sun rose as I reached the edge of the mesa, and I found a spot where “the whole immensity of the Gila basin lay spread before us” (Leopold, 9 November 1929).



View of the immensity of the Gila west from latitude/longitude 33.2575, -108.2193.

My adventures continued. I walked up the Middle Fork for the next three days. I made new friends, saw bears, identified wildflowers, napped in the heat of the day, thought about new challenges for the second century of wilderness preservation, and observed stunning rock formations reflected in still waters.



The trail up the Middle Fork of the Gila walks sometimes on one bank, sometimes on the other, and occasionally up the middle of the stream. There is a set of cascades where the gorge walls are so close that the trail has no option but to walk right up within the cascades.



When I finished that – not as hard as it sounds – a Peregrine Falcon swooped down, orbited above my head twice, then flew off.

But I lacked enough time to reach the Flying V Canyon, where Leopold had camped in 1927. You will have to visit that site yourself.

So I turned around and spent three days walking back. Of course I had to walk down the same cascade. I swam in the plunge pool, then ate dinner while drying off. A Golden Eagle perched on a dead snag and watched me eat.